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What are we doing wrong?

Are America's destitute worse off than India's?

April 27, 2019 By [Jim Chappell](#) — [Leave a Comment](#)

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IT

" Dateline: January 1968. New Delhi. "Beautiful city, people friendly, but very crowded, solid people in the parks, living in the fort, camped out in the railroad station."

"Dateline: January 2019, Mumbai. "There are very few beggars on the streets, unlike the hordes of homeless in San Francisco and other American cities."

These are actual quotes from my travel diaries on two trips to India fifty years apart. On this latest trip, I steeled myself in preparation for the intensity and chaos of India. And indeed it is both. But my observation holds: I saw far fewer people panhandling or sprawled on the streets in India than in San Francisco, or any other west coast North American city for that matter. And there was a marked improvement from my first trip to India in 1968.

First, let me say that if you are looking for a scientific study, or an informed academic treatise, this isn't it. These are simply the observations of one reasonably informed, reasonably traveled American. I haven't done the back-up research I normally would do before writing, nor do I expect I will find time to do so. But so many people have asked me to write up a few thoughts, here they are. What I did do is a little reality testing with three other acquaintances who also happened by chance to be in India this past January. They each confirmed my observations about the frequency of homelessness and displacement, as well as associated street crime and safety.

I am sure there are many travelers who have had different observations, and many who are better informed on both the causes and remedies of poverty, and the ins and outs of comparative societies in the two countries. I look forward to hearing their interpretations.

On both these trips I was in India for over a month. Both were in January when the weather was most conducive to being outdoors, day and night. And on both of these trips I wandered far and wide, day and night, basically on my own, in all kinds of neighborhoods. There is a whole level of security I felt in India just knowing that random people do not have guns. I never once felt threatened or even uneasy. People were uniformly friendly. While I saw surprisingly few western travelers, I didn't feel particularly noticed, except by youth who wanted a picture with their foreign "friend." That in itself was to me an indication how relatively rare westerners are in many of the non-tourist places I went, and that I wasn't solely seeing a sanitized tourist India, if such a thing could even exist.

IT In 1958 the population of Bombay was reported to be under a million. While an accurate census probably does not exist, today the city of Mumbai proper is said to be something like 12 million and the urban conurbation something like 20 million. Delhi was and is at a similar scale. The actual numbers don't matter for this discussion. The point is these are huge places, in a huge country (1.3 billion, or four times the U.S.), places where effective governance, much less urban planning, are hard to conceive. And certainly, I only saw a small sampling of each of the five metros I visited, and a tiny sampling of India itself.

There are people everywhere, not to mention cars, motorcycles, bikes, scooters, tuk-tuks, pedestrians, cows, the occasional camel or elephant, and whatever. Most everything is somewhat ramshackle; houses of the wealthy, slums, government buildings, commercial buildings, buildings by great architects like Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn. The climate is punishing. And the country is poor – per capita income is something like \$2000/year, compared with \$45,000 in the US. And as we all know, such averages hide even worse poverty at the bottom, both here and there.

Many of us saw the 2008 Academy Award Best Picture *Slumdog Millionaire*. Yes, those slums exist; yes, millions of people are very poor by any standard we know, and yes, a casual internet search reports that the beggars' mafia kidnaps children, maims them and puts them to work. But frankly, while I walked in slums and in downtowns and in between, I saw very few people living on the streets and very few beggars, none maimed. The Dharavi slum in Mumbai featured in the movie is home to an estimated 700,000 people on around 500 acres, astoundingly dense (San Francisco is around 900,000 people on 182,000 acres). All told, several millions of Mumbai residents live in slums. These slums are informal settlements, very crowded, without land or tenancy security, with iffy water and electricity supplies, and little if

any proper sewerage. People are poor, but not necessarily destitute, as there is a thriving informal economy within the slum. And some of these slums have existed since the height of the British Raj. Many are established de facto neighborhoods. People conduct their daily lives there and have for generations. City government just hasn't kept up with the services any proper neighborhood requires.



Fig. 1

Figure 1 shows the Mahalaxmi Dhobi Ghat in Mumbai, the outdoor clothes laundry that has been here for 150 years. On the right of the picture are the laundry ghats where the Dhobis beat the clothes, and in the center the residences of some of the Dhobis, the 7,000 laundry workers, and their families. Amazingly, some 500,000 articles of clothing are laundered here each day, and somehow get back to their rightful owners. Houses are perhaps one room for the whole family, jerry-built of found materials. The municipal government, here as elsewhere in India, is in the slow process of building workers housing on the sites of the slums and abandoned urban factories. New high rises can be seen in the background. Yes, by any measure, this is a slum. But people are housed, not the "homeless" wandering San Francisco streets, and many are employed at some level.



Fig. 2

This is not to say there are not homeless encampments. **Figure 2** is a street corner in Ahmedabad, a city of perhaps 9 million, where this ramshackle construction of sheet metal appears to be growing incrementally into the public right of way, serving as both an informal recycling center and domicile, resembling some of the homeless encampments in California cities, which often operate as living places and repurposing/recycling centers. I suspect, like **TT** here, this may be subject to demolition by the authorities at any time, again rendering the inhabitants homeless.



Fig. 3

And **Figure 3** is an established slum in Ahmedabad where my Indian host took me. In her sixty years in the city, she knew of this slum but had never been there, and wanted to see it herself.

Here the houses were more substantial than in Mumbai's large slums, but beds and kitchens were as likely to be outdoors as indoors. Sheet metal lean-tos filled in odd corners. People were friendly and pleasant. They had bikes and motorcycles as seen in the photo, suggesting some at least were employed. There is just not enough room to accommodate the population in formal neighborhoods with utilities and building permits.

I understand most of the slum dwellers are employed, the working poor. The situation is that there isn't enough proper housing available because the country's population is growing so fast, particularly the urban population. In each city, I tried to ask about the economy, about people's lives, about their jobs and living conditions. What I was consistently told (and I admit this might be a story fed to foreign visitors) is that everyone has a job that wants a job, that people are busy doing things. "Job" means something different there than here. These are informal jobs, someone selling something, making something, providing a service, as a sole entrepreneur, or perhaps a small family enterprise, on a day-to-day existence.



Fig. 4

Figure 4 shows a woman on the sidewalk in Jaipur cleaning dhal, picking small stones out of the dried legumes, a necessary but completely unskilled activity. **Figure 5** is a woman, also in Jaipur, with a sewing machine on the sidewalk, making clothes. These are their jobs, probably not paying enough to have a proper house. These may well be slum-dwellers. But they are working and earning at least some semblance of a living.



Fig. 5

Like the Dhobis successfully handling large numbers of articles, there are many other examples of seemingly uneducated workers involved in complex operations. As shown in **Figure 6**, Mumbai's 5,000 Dabbawalas pick up and deliver 200,000 hot home-cooked lunches 6 days a week with a reported less than 4 errors per million. The mother or wife or sister at home cooks and packs your lunch; a specific Dabbawala picks it up on foot or bike by 11:00 AM. He bikes or takes a train to a predetermined train station where the lunches are sorted on the sidewalk by destination and a different Dabbawala gangs the right ones together and delivers them to each office by 1 PM. Then the process is repeated in reverse to return your correct empty lunch containers to your home. The Dabbawalas are self-employed and each paid the same. They come from the same village and belong to the same religious sect. They have a professional association. They do this work for their lifetime.



Fig. 6

Interestingly, while in India I read that the U.S. food delivery service Munchery was the latest such service to go bankrupt. I presume the Munchery workers had the privilege of applying for Unemployment Insurance. The Dabbawalas are not about to go out of business. They have been doing their jobs for 125 years. This is backbreaking work that we would (wrongly) classify as unskilled, and the pay is minimal but steady. These kinds of learned jobs for those without any formal education can be found all over India.



Fig. 7

Grocery shopping in India is a daily occurrence...everything is expected to be fresh everyday. Each neighborhood has a milk distribution point where before dawn trucks unload pasteurized and packaged milk from the dairy in these yellow plastic crates. **Figure 7** shows a bread deliveryman meeting up at the milk delivery station. This delivery business is a cash business. A middleman pays the trucker who brings the milk from the dairy. The trucker then pays the dairy. A local delivery person buys the milk from the middleman and delivers the yellow crates of milk to scores or hundreds of local shops and restaurants, which in turn pay him, the second middleman/delivery man. The housewife sends one of her maids out to buy fresh milk, produce, and meat or fish from a retailer (if the family is not vegetarian) every morning before breakfast. All cash. **Figure 8** shows a vegetable market on the pavement in front of the Palace Theater in Mumbai. Like the milk distribution, all this takes place in the public right-of-way, starting maybe 5 AM and is gone by time the adjacent retail stores open at 10 or 11 AM. This intricate ballet of individual entrepreneurs provides hyper local jobs for individuals without any overall corporate structure. I suspect networks of castes and sects and hometowns knit them together in ways I do not understand, but what one can see is that these are necessary jobs in a low-tech world. And many thousands of people have these jobs and are not beggars.



Fig. 8

Another thing that happens on the sidewalk in the wee hours is the sorting of newspapers, slipping in special sections, ads, etc., and bundling the correct mix of papers for each deliveryman's route. Newspapers are still thriving in India. I am told that every middle class and above household subscribes to at least two different newspapers, maybe more on Sunday. Mumbai alone is served by 7 different papers. And these mostly appear to be real papers, not *USA Today*-type infotainment. Some like *The Times of India* has a different issue for every major city. It comes in Hindi and English versions, at least. Other papers are in the local language such as Marathi in Mumbai or Gujarati in Ahmedabad. There are many combinations of papers that must be put together so the deliveryman has the right bundle for the right household. **Figure 9** shows these sorters hard at work. A Chaiwalla sets up shop brewing hot tea to feed the sorters (**Figure 10**). Since newspaper sorting is a 4:30 – 6:30 AM job, these are part time jobs, maybe the newspaper man becomes the Dabbawalla at lunchtime, and something else in the evening.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Figure 11 shows an entrepreneur who is a three-day-a-week seminar on getting to the gate board is not a barrier to most of the things that he is doing that for an added charge he is also a state licence for the jobs. And, it is a shame that from his knowledge he is also a state licence for the



Fig 11

entrepreneurial spirit is not a barrier to most of the things that he is doing that for an added charge he is also a state licence for the jobs. And, it is a shame that from his knowledge he is also a state licence for the employment opportunities

that is not a barrier to most of the things that he is doing that for an added charge he is also a state licence for the jobs. And, it is a shame that from his knowledge he is also a state licence for the work to some extent, at least for the physically abled

I had to try, need to find a way to photograph. Here, a mother with her children at the entrance to the historicanned city. The mother, in the foreground. **Figure 12** This one, which was rare, and it's from the early 1990s.



Fig 12

Figure 13 ... I found this picture ...



Fig. 13

These are Jain nuns (**Figure 14**) who wader the country barefoot at least 8 months a year. They cannot work or cook. They carry a staff and gourd for food donations. They are professional beggars. I saw other professional beggars..the couple in Mumbai dressed in red, beating drums, with two oxen. Everyone in town knew them. They were professional beggars. And then there were the young men who approach you to clean out your ears! This must be one of the most creative if bizarre invented jobs ever.



Fig. 14

As I was relaying the story of my India trip to a friend, and how different it was from 50 years ago, he asked, "What did they do to get rid of begging." I don't know. But I think that is the wrong question. It's not what they did. The lack of begging should be the normal condition. The question is, "What are we doing wrong that we have so many destitute people?" Much has changed in 50 years in this country to take us from the occasional panhandler to thousands of homeless persons all over the city. Decreases in effective incomes and increases in costs of living are a powerful combination. But even with those fundamental drivers of homelessness uncorrected, what is wrong with us that we cannot help the indigent into gainful and useful endeavors? I suspect part of it is the high number of drug addicted or mentally ill among the homeless in this country. And chronically unemployed. Housing is only part of the puzzle, albeit perhaps the most important part.

India is a tremendously different culture, an ancient culture with religions and family structures and social structures different from ours. I am not qualified to draw any conclusions from it. But somehow they have managed to provide work that is necessary for society and meaningful enough to the individuals that they do it. And the people have a place to live, very substandard though it may be.

It seems in many ways as though America's destitute are worse off than the most destitute people of the country we believed set the standard for the world's most destitute people. I do not know what we should be doing but I do know clearly we are doing something wrong.

All Photos by Jim Chappell



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About Jim Chappell

Jim Chappell holds a Bachelor of Architecture from Syracuse University and a Master of City Planning from the University of Pennsylvania. A San Franciscan since 1977, he led the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR) for 15 years, culminating in the opening of the SPUR Urban Center, designed by Pfau-Long Architecture, in the Yerba Buena Cultural District. Jim helped build SPUR into one of the country's most respected urban affairs think tanks, and has been a frequent contributor to local and national publications.

He has taught architecture, landscape architecture and urban design and lectures widely at colleges and universities throughout the west. He has been widely honored by the AIA/SF, AIA California Chapter, Lambda Alpha International Honorary Land Economics Society, and the Yerba

Buena Alliance among many others. He is noted for bringing a culture of balanced and informed debate to San Francisco Bay Area community issues through research, education, and public advocacy.

He currently chairs the board of trustees of Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, a 15 acre, 300,000 square-foot historic former military-base-turned-art-center on San Francisco Bay, where he leads the revitalization efforts to serve the arts community for the next hundred years; is treasurer of the board of trustees of the Campus Facilities Improvement Association at the University of California Mission Bay; and is an active volunteer studying and making recommendations on policy matters at SPUR and at the Housing Action Coalition.

